Musicologica Olomucensia 38 – 2026/1
DOI: 10.5507/mo.2026.001

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Bedřich Smetana's National-Historical Operas as Media for the Expression of Political Attitudes[1]

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Abstract

The article explores how Bedřich Smetana's national-historical operas functioned as media for transmitting of political messages in 19th-century Bohemia. The study examines *The Brandenburgers in Bohemia* and *Libuše* and aims to demonstrate how Smetana and his librettists intentionally embedded political discourse that drew on national history, myth, and current events. In *The Brandenburgers in Bohemia*, historical trauma associated with the 13th-century Brandenburg occupation provided a framework to address themes of oppression, national unity, and resistance, which in turn resonated with 19th-century experiences of national struggle. When dealing with *Libuše*, the article highlights elements of the opera that reinforce ideas of the continuity of Bohemian statehood, legal autonomy, and democratic traditions. Particular attention is paid to the analysis of potential political interpretations of the opera's *finale*, the scene of Libuše's prophecy, whose function was – especially if seen against the backdrop of Franz Josef's unfulfilled promises to Bohemia – to celebrate the most glorious rulers and events from the time of the national rulers, and to emphasize the persistence of the Czech people. Through the elements mentioned, both operas sought to mobilize patriotic sentiments within the 19th-century theatre audience.

Keywords

Bedřich Smetana; opera; politics; *The Brandenburgers in Bohemia*; *Libuše*

[1] This work has been supported by the Croatian Science Foundation under the project IP-2020-02-4277 "Institutionalization of Modern Bourgeois Musical Culture in the 19th Century in Civil Croatia and Military Frontier" and the Croatian Institute of History under the project 380-01-02-23-41 "Croatia and Europe: Institutions and Individuals in the Development of Modern Society and State".

In the 19th century theatre, and operatic theatre especially, had a very important social function that went far beyond its cultural domain. Opera had the power to influence society – it reacted to, reflected and even encouraged social changes, and with the strengthening of national movements, corresponding topics found their place more and more often on the stage as well. In this period "even the apparently least political of arts, music, had the strongest political associations, […] perhaps the only period in history when operas were written as, or taken to be, political manifestos and triggered off revolutions."[2] Bohemia was no exception to that, as music was often used to express desires of national emancipation, but also to represent the people – the nation that underwent the process of shaping into a modern nation precisely in that period.[3] In many cases, it were not only the topics that were interpreted as political allegories by the audience, but the opera creators (composers and librettists) fully intended the political implications that the opera conveyed. Such was the case with Smetana's operas, whose work, beside artistic ideals, was marked by political discourse and elements of his political stances – both as a Czech patriot and a supporter of the Young Czech Party (*Mladočeši*) – can be found in his work.[4]

However, this was also the time when censorship was still present, so the political messages that the plays contained had to be veiled enough not to be censored, but also clear enough to be understood by the audience (which was often done by putting allusions to current political situations in the opera's plot). The presence of national elements in a certain opera varied in intensity, and was basically always a point of discussion (whether it was present or not, and if so, was it prominent enough, etc.). Even though it was always difficult to assess how "national" the music was, there were other elements that greatly contributed to a work being perceived as being truly national. First was the language – at the beginnings of national movements it was often enough that a work was composed by a national composer and on an original libretto in the local national language. The plot was also usually set in a location in a country to which the opera belonged or even in a historic time, but that was not crucial for the plot. Examples of such first operas are František Škroup's *Dráteník* or Vatroslav Lisinski's *Love and Malice*. With the development of national movements, and especially in the second half of the 19th century, operas were very often used to

[2] Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Revolution 1789–1848* (Vintage Books, 1996), 256.

[3] Cf. Olga Mojžíšová, "Bedřich Smetana: An Artist and a Man of His Times," *Musicologica Olomucensia* 33, no. 2 (2021/2022): 430–431.

[4] Ivana Rentsch, "A Coronation Opera against the Emperor: Bedřich Smetana's *Libuše* and the Political Power of Imagery," in *Bedřich Smetana and European Opera*, ed. Aleš Březina and Ivana Rentsch (Königshausen & Neumann GmbH, 2024), 60; Mirko Očadlík, *Libuše. Vznik Smetanovy zpěvohry* (Editio Supraphon, 1984), 33, 173.

convey political attitudes and messages. And in that context, operas dealing with topics from national history proved to be a very good method of transmitting such messages; because such operas could contain veiled allusions to political reality, reminders of glorious national pasts and reminders of great victories and defeats, which were elements that at the same time enticed cohesion and expressed disagreements with contemporary authorities.

Good examples of operas that served to strengthen national identity and express political messages within Bedřich Smetana's opus were *Brandenburgers in Bohemia* [*Braniboři v Čechách*] and *Libuše*. And the political messages were conveyed in relation to three main elements: 1) by relying on collective memory of the event or period it was representing; 2) through the plot itself, that is, through the statements expressed or positions taken by the characters; and 3) through possible interpretation, that is, allusions and associations to the current political climate.

The Brandenburgers in Bohemia

Smetana intended the opera *Brandenburgers in Bohemia* as his entry to count Harrach's competition to create a true Czech national opera[5] – thus, this opera should be interpreted in this tone, even though the plot itself contains political messages only in some places, and can only be interpreted as an allegory for the real events of the 13th century (and as only an allusion to the 19th-century general circumstances) in others.

The opera is set in the period of the Brandenburg government in Bohemia (1278–1283), which is remembered as a very negative period of Czech history. It was marked by the defeat at Marchfeld in 1278, in which King Otakar II was killed, and the following five years of the Brandenburg government, which is said to have been very cruel. The plot is largely based on Václav Vladivoj Tomek's *Děje země české*, as well as Josef Kajetán Tyl's tale *Braniboři v Čechách*. According to Tomek, Otto of Brandenburg, who took guardianship over the minor crown prince Václav, imprisoned him and his mother in the Bezděz castle and later took the crown prince to Brandenburg with him, where he was kept in very poor conditions. During this period, the Brandenburg army pillaged the land – they robbed treasuries of Prague cathedral and some churches, as well as some noble houses; on top of that, they were very cruel to the people, whom they tortured and robbed. Besides, that period was also marked by natural disasters –

[5] The guidelines stated that the competition was intended to create two operas „to the honour and glory of the dear Czech nation […] one of which must have a historical basis from the history of the Czech Crown, and the other, of cheerful content, taken from the national life," Jan hrabě Harach, "[Není národa…]," *Lumír, týdenník belletristický* 11, no. 8 (February 21, 1861), 186.

plague, floods, storms, extremely strong winters, and extreme hunger.[6] Older chronicles mentioned that in this period the Bohemian nobility split, fighting amongst themselves, before they united in order to drive the Brandenburgers out of the country,[7] while Tomek only mentions that the nobility rose against the Brandenburgers.[8] Tomek concludes the narration of this period with information that Otto of Brandenburg demanded 20,000 hryvnas of silver in order to release Václav II, instead of which the Czech Estates handed him a number of important towns, but also that the king returned to the country which brought an end to this terrible period.[9]

While the hardships the country was facing in the 19th century were different from those of the period of the Brandenburg government in the 13th century, there were similarities that the audience could have observed (primarily the strong oppressive Germanization of the Neo-absolutist period) and thus interpret the work as being politically engaged.

On top of that, it is a known psychological fact that the community gathers around shared experiences, and it doesn't matter if these are shared successes or defeats, so the opera that dealt with one of the darkest eras of national history served a cohesive function that was supposed to bring the nation together and send the message that they – "they" the audience, but also "they" the entire nation – had already encountered hardships in the past, but overcame them, and that they will surely just like that overcome the hardships they are facing in the present, as well.

Political messages and allusions

One of the reasons that national-historical operas were so successful in stimulating patriotism in general is the fact that they relied on collective memory and interpretation of past events that were in accordance with what the audience knew, or perceived to know, about the event, thus further strengthening the sense of cohesion it was meant to incite. Furthermore, the authors could insert political allusions they wanted to convey especially successfully in this genre.

The plot itself consists of metaphors of actual historical events, i.e., the three sisters, Ludiše, Děčana and Vlčenka symbolise the imprisoned king Václav II, and similarities with the accounts from the chronicles can be observed in several

[6] Václav Vladivoj Tomek, *Děje země české* (Prague, 1843), 116–117.

[7] *Dalimilova kronika*, chapter XCIII; *Chronicon Aulae regiae*, chapter IX, in *Fontes rerum austriacarum*, Part 1, Vol. 8, *Königsaaler Geschichts-Quellen*, ed. Johann Loserth (Vienna, 1875), 50–51; František Pubička, *Chronologische Geschichte Böhmens*, Vol. IV (Prague, 1781), 466.

[8] Tomek, *Děje země české*, 117.

[9] Ibid., 118.

scenes: when the sisters seek protection from the citizens of Prague, Jiřa, while pretending willingness to protect them, is in fact ready to hand them over to Tausendmark because he has no interest in helping them.[10] That scene resembles accounts from the chronicles that describe that the citizens of Prague handed over the young king Václav to Otto of Brandenburg for their own interests (and in some chronicles the account reads as the king was almost sold to the prince);[11] likewise, most of the chronicles that deal with this period state that Otto of Brandenburg demanded ransom for the release of Václav II, and that he demanded even more money and/or estates after the Czech Estates have paid it to him,[12] and in the opera plot the Brandenburg captain Varneman demands ransom from the major of Prague, Volfram Olbramovič, for the release of his daughters.[13] On the other hand, some elements are pretty consistent with the way in which the period of the Brandenburger rule was described in the chronicles (especially in the first scene of Act II, in which villagers are shown fleeing their homes to take refuge in the forests, trying to escape Brandenbrugers' looting and cruelties), and to an extent the *deus ex machina* resolution of the Brandenburg occupation, as well (after lengthy negotiations with the Estates, the prince of Brandenburg agreed to leave Bohemia with his army within three day time, which, in the opera came as a catalyst towards the plot resolution). While leaning on the events from national history (especially if the events in question are tragic or are seen as collective trauma) could have been seen as a patriotic decision in the narrative formation in itself, the opera contains two other main political messages – of the importance of national unity, and the general anti-oppression sentiments, which are expressed both through associations with the memory of the period of Brandenburg rule over Bohemia, and through association with the then-contemporary political situation.

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[10] Jiřa (to Tausendmark): *Where's your prudence? / We are far too many! / Throw them a few silver pieces / and you will spare spilling of blood! / What's the maiden to us? / We are after profit – / and nothing else matters!* Bedřich Smetana and Karel Sabina, *Braniboři v Čechách* (Supraphon, 1965), I, 10.

[11] Cf. *Chronicon Aulae regiae*, chapter IX, 51.

[12] *Chronicon Aulae regiae*, chapter XIV, 59–60; Giovanni Marignolli, *Kronika Marignolova*, in *Prameny dějin českých*, Vol. III, ed. Josef Jireček, Josef Emler, and Ferdinand Tadra (Prague, 1882), 575; Přibík z Radenína, *Kronika Pulkavova*, chapter LXXVII, in *Prameny dějin českých*, Vol. V, ed. Josif Emler (Prague, 1893), 169; Václav Hájek z Libočan, *Kronika Česká*, Vol. IV (Czech Academy of Sciences and Arts, 1933), 104–105; František Pubička, *Chronologische Geschichte Böhmens*, Vol. III (Prague, 1781), 481, 489; Tomek, *Děje země české*, 118; František Palacký, *Geschichte von Böhmen*, Vol. 2 (Prague, 1847), 304, 313.

[13] Varneman: *Tell him that his lovely daughters / a Brandenburg officer has / guarded and protected, / lest any harm or evil should / befall them. / Tell him to send me / three hundred guldens for protecting / immediately, immediately, immediately, or I'll take them far away / and I'll find the buyer elsewhere.* Smetana, Sabina, *Braniboři v Čechách*, II, 3.

The importance of national unity, vital for the formation of modern nations in the 19th century, was emphasized through the topic of discord among the Czech nobility in the 13th century, which is most directly addressed through the character of Jan Tausendmark, who sides with the Brandenburgers out of his own interest, and whose treason disgusts even the Brandenburg captain Varneman. Unlike Tausendmark, Varneman does have a moral compass (despite all cruelties he and his army have committed against the Czech people), and the scene in which he condemns Tausendamark is among those most charged with Czech patriotism – and the fact that it was one of the antagonists saying the words that were meant to incite patriotism has caused quite a dissatisfaction of the critics after the first performance.[14] This topic is also present in Junoš's lamentation that some Czechs have joined Brandenburg looting too: *Amongst those who have been looting / – shame! shame! – / are the Rosts, the Tausendmarks, / yes, and Jacob Velflovic, / Friedinger and Martin of Cheb / stood at the head!*[15] But, on the other hand, now highlighting the unity instead of discord, the opera finishes with grand scene of joy, in which the chorus, representing the entirety of the people, celebrates the country's rights and its protectors and expresses hope that good times and glory will return to their Czech homeland.[16]

Maybe the most striking, and within the then-current political context most easily understood, political message was the general anti-German sentiment present throughout the opera. While Martin Nedbal argues that the strong anti-German and (thus) anti-Austrian connotations that are usually attributed to this opera largely came into existence during the late 19th and in the 20th century, and especially after the Second World War,[17] when the focus shifted from national unity and endurance to the strict orientation against the German invader as an enemy, I maintain that both aspects – national unity and resistance to the German oppression were inextricably connected in the 19th-century Czech national movement, and that for that reason the anti-German sentiment, conveyed via this opera, had its political purpose, in the authors' intention, but especially in the reception. However, the anti-Germaness is a complex issue in this context. First of all, at the time, the German's were not yet being perceived as a unified national entity in the Czech lands, with German Bohemians being viewed as different to Saxons, them to Prussians, all of them to Austrians etc.[18] Also, any

[14] Martin Nedbal, "Smetana's *The Brandenburgers in Bohemia* and Czech Nationalism: A Historical Reevaluation," *Music and Politics* 14, no. 1 (2020): 5.

[15] Smetana, Sabina, *Braniboři v Čechách*, I, 2.

[16] Ibid., III, 9.

[17] Nedbal, "Smetana's *The Brandenburgers in Bohemia* and Czech Nationalism," 2–3.

[18] Ibid., 4, 7.

anti-Germaness expressed in the opera should only be understood in a political sense (i.e., directed against a force that was oppressing the country's rights or was threatening to do so), and not in a national one, since this opera was not by any means directed against a large Bohemian German–, or German speaking, population. Up to the 1860's the anti-German sentiments in the general public were mostly directed against the Austrians, and against the Habsburgs and their policies specifically, caused by their long oppression of the Czech rights (after the defeat in the Battle of White Mountain in 1620, Bohemia was reduced to Habsburg hereditary land, the Estate's rights were diminished, the parliament's legislative rights were suspended and the Habsburg king ruled the country by the appointed governor and via decrees,[19] and after the defeat of the Prague uprising the concessions granted to Bohemia after the Petition of Svatováclavske lázně were suspended). In that context, *The Brandenburgers* could have been understood as an anti-Austrian opera in which one German invader (the Brandenburgers) was representing the other (the Austrians/Habsburgs), leaning on the still strong collective memory of the 13th-century occupation, which, in the eyes of the 19th-century patriots, could have been compared to the Habsburg rule.[20] On the other hand, the first half of 1866 was the eve of the Austro-Prussian war with the relations between the two countries continuously tightening throughout the first half of the year, and being located on the border, Bohemia was the land most exposed to the possible attack. Thus, even before the battle of Hradec Králové (July 3rd, 1866) the Brandenburgers in the opera could have only be interpreted as current invaders from the province of Brandenburg, the Prussian army.[21] For that reason, the most likely then-current interpretation would have been anti-Prussian, which would also explain why the Austrian censorship hasn't had any objections – not only because in 1860's it was less harsh than before,[22] but also because the primary interpretation wouldn't have been to see the opera as directed against the state, the state order or the government. On the contrary, immediately after the war of 1866, *The Brandenburgers* were not only seen as an anti-Prussian, but as a pro-Austrian, loyalist opera. The best example of this stance is the fact that it was precisely *The Brandenburgers* that were intended to

[19] Cf. Stanisław Rabiej, "Ambivalent assessment of the consequences of the Battle of White Mountain (1620). Defeat, Revolt, and the Crystallization of Czech Identity," *Studia Oecumenica* 25 (2025): 67; Robert A. Kann, *A History of the Habsburg Empire, 1526–1918* (University of California Press, 1974), 130.

[20] Cf. John Tyrell, *Czech Opera* (Cambridge University Press, 1988), 130; Jan Smaczny, "Grand Opera among the Czechs," in *The Cambridge Companion to Grand Opera*, ed. David Charlton (Cambridge University Press, 2003), 374.

[21] Cf. Nedbal, "Smetana's *The Brandenburgers in Bohemia* and Czech Nationalism," 4–5, 15.

[22] Cf. ibid., 9–10.

be ceremoniously performed on the occasion of Francis Joseph's visit to Prague in October 1866, but were exchanged for *The Bartered Bride*, as not to cause Prussian protests, especially since the Augsburg *Allgemeine Zeitung* complained that the opera contained too many allusions of "recent events."[23]

In conclusion, it would be the most accurate to state that *The Brandenburgers in Bohemia* is an anti-oppression opera, and not necessarily an anti-German one, while it only so happened that both the oppressors in the 19th century, the Habsburgs and the Prussians, were of German ethnicity. However, throughout the late 19th and in the 20th centuries, especially after the Nazi occupation, the focus shifted from national unity and endurance, and *The Brandenburgers* gained the aura of exemplary and exclusively anti-German work, which was the very reason why the first post-war season (1945/1946) season of the State Opera (called the New German Theatre during the occupation) was opened with the performance of this opera.[24]

There were other topics with political connotations discussed in and through this opera, such as the question of language. The first two stages of the Czech national revival movement dealt precisely with the question of language, and the goal was to revive Czech, to achieve language standardization, to enrich it with new terms in order to get it to the level of development that all topics (both everyday ones, and those from the domains of high culture and science) could be effortlessly discussed, and to achieve as wide as possible use of the Czech language in the population. However, Germanisation was strong throughout the 19th century, and especially in the period of Neo-absolutism, so the language problem was primarily a political question, and the fact that, in the opera, the enemy was supressing the Czech language[25] meant that it was attempting to annihilate the nation's very identity[26] – which was, again, topic that could have convincingly been set in the 13th-century opera plot, but understood in the context of the 19th-century issues.

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[23] Ibid., 15–16.

[24] Ibid., 1.

[25] Such as in the first scene of Act I, in which the knight Oldřich Rokycanský explains the terrible situation in which the country is in and calls for action: Oldřich: *Now is the time we must take to arms / and chase out the Brandenburgers, / who ruin the land and our language*; Oldřich: *[…] Lord Otto Brandenburg also suppressed / our language, that glorious Czech language, / so that you wouldn't recognize Prague! […]*. In Smetana, Sabina, *Braniboři v Čechách*, I, 1.

[26] This aspect is most dramatically shown at the beginning of Act II, where the old man describes the Brandenburgers' cruelties (and the chorus repeats his words): *Our fields they have all wasted […] Our huts they have all burnt down. […] Our children they have murdered. […] Our youth they have estranged. […] This lovely Bohemian land / by cruel means they have laid waste / and the glorious Czech people / they have enslaved, they have enslaved!* In ibid, II, 1.

Another political aspect that can be observed in *The Brandenburgers* is connected to Karel Sabina's radical democratic orientation, which, according to Jaroslav Jiránek, was not too far for Smetana's own stances.[27] Thus, the people take prominent role in the libretto, and it could be argued that the people are the opera's main character as a collective entity. This approach is clearly visible in a couple of instances: at the beginning of Act II the villagers are fleeing their village and describing the Brandenburgers' cruelties;[28] and even more so in the scenes which involve the poor of Prague. This group (to stay true to their insistence in the libretto that they're not a mob, but the people)[29] at first sees the new circumstances as potentially advantageous for their own situation,[30] but are nevertheless ready to help the sisters when they are chased by Tausendmark's men,[31] and are the ones who are ready to punish Tausendmark for betrayal even without a trial[32] – thus portrayed as poor, disenfranchised, and eager to overthrown the current social system, but still as good people and loyal Czechs. Finally, it is the people who in the opera's last scene are celebrating the truth, the land's rights and its protectors, and are announcing the arrival of better times for the country.[33]

Finally, it could be argued that the main political point made through *The Brandenburgers* was that of the nation's persistence and the possibility of eventual achievement of freedom despite the most unfavourable of circumstances. Therefore, the celebration of freedom at the opera's *finale* is both a declaration of rejection of subjugation to Prussia in the future and an expression of the desire for greater political autonomy in the Habsburg Monarchy. In this context, it is important to point out that, in terms of atmosphere, this opera consists of two parts – before and after the Brandenburg withdrawal. The first part depicts the hardships that Bohemia experienced under Brandenburg rule – which was

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[27] Jaroslav Jiránek, *Smetanova operní tvorba, Vol. 1, Od Braniborů v Čechách k Libuši* (Editio Supraphon, 1984), 41.

[28] Smetana, Sabina, *Braniboři v Čechách*, II, 1.

[29] *My nejsme luza! My jsme lid!*. In ibid., I, 10.

[30] After the Brandenburg soldiers had sacked the churches and palaces of the aristocracy, the poor of Prague started looting the houses of the wealthy townsmen, proclaiming in a most famous opera number that "their time had now come." Cf. ibid. I, 7–8.

[31] Ibid., I, 9.

[32] However, while the people are eager to see him punished, it is emphasized that he will stand trial (but this time the fact that he is "Tausendmark's son" won't help him), which was important since it wouldn't be appropriate to portray the people, which is being portrayed as an innocent victim of oppression throughout the opera, as a lynch mob or as being as cruel and ruthless as the Brandenburgers. Cf. ibid., III, 8.

[33] Ibid., III, 9.

remembered as a tyranny in the collective memory (and the scenes were to an extent based on chronicles and historical narratives, which gave them more weight), but that could also have been interpreted as allusion to the current 19th-century Habsburg rule – and as such had a mobilizing function of encouraging the audience's patriotism and stimulating their readiness for concrete action. The second part, and especially the *finale* with its joyous ending, was meant to awaken hope and remind the audience that the struggle would not be in vain and that the national cause was worth fighting for because such a fight had already been successful in the past.

Libuše

In the 19th century, at the time of the first performance of Smetana's opera, Libuše was one of the central figures in Czech collective memory, even though she was not a real historical but a mythical figure, and the reasons for her prominent place changed throughout history and in accordance with wider political circumstances. In the Middle Ages, she was considered to be a real historical person, and the narrative about her confirmed continuity from the earlier periods and represented a collection of information about the establishment of the social order at the time of the earliest principality and about the establishment of the national dynasty. After the Habsburgs became Bohemian kings, the narrative of Libuše was used to confirm Bohemian statehood and its continuity from the Early Middle Ages. Also, its intended purpose was to show that the rule of the national dynasty was superior to the Habsburg reign. After the authors of the Enlightenment period undoubtedly concluded that Libuše was not a real historical person, the narrative encountered twofold approach in the 19th century: one part of the scientific public, insisting on scientific approach and necessity of historical sources, started treating the story of Libuše as just one of the old legends; while the other current still considered her to be a real historical person. Their positions were strengthened by the fake discoveries of *Rukopis zelenohorský* and *Rukopis královédvorský*. *Rukopis zelenohorský* contained fragments with information about the medieval legal system and the story of the Libuše's judgement and the discussion on their authenticity got so heated in the public sphere that one's attitude towards them (whether they were original medieval documents or forgeries) surpassed mere scientific stance and was seen as a declaration towards national movement, i.e., if a person was a Czech patriot or not.[34]

However, regardless of one's stance towards Libuše's historical existence, this narrative was one of the crucial moments of Czech cultural memory because its

[34] David Cooper, *Mystifications and Ritual Practices in the Czech National Awakening*, NCEEER Working Paper (University of Illinois, 2012), 4, 6–7.

function was to preserve the memory of Bohemian statehood, the memory of the Přemyslid dynasty and with that the idea that before the foreigners came to the Bohemian throne, they had their own long-lasting and successful dynasty (which existed long before the Habsburg family gained power in Europe); and to preserve the memory that Bohemian principality had its own legal system as early as in Early Middle Ages that was on an equal level with the German legal system, and through that the idea that Bohemia should have far greater rights and much wider autonomy as part of the Habsburg Monarchy in the 19th century. The narrative was well-known, whether through older historiography, or the books of legends and opera authors, composer Smetana and librettist Wenzig could count on the fact that the audience would have an already existing understanding of this.[35]

Political messages and allusions

National idea was conveyed via the opera *Libuše* both through its contents (i.e., political ideas alluded to in the libretto), and through its sources. Namely, most information found in the libretto that was based on some of the existing sources, was incorporated in a way that they appeared in the *Kronika česká* by Cosmas of Prague and *Rukopis zelenohorský*,[36] and that is especially true for the court scene. However, using the *Rukopis zelenohorský* as a source was also important in the context of the ongoing public debate whether the manuscripts were genuine medieval documents or 19th-century forgeries.[37] Using it in the opera libretto,

[35] On the authors' certainty of the audience's familiarity with the subject cf. citations in the article: Michal Fránek and Ladislav Futtera, "Postava kněžny Libuše v německých a českých operních libretech 19. století," *Hudební věda* LVIII, no. 4 (2021): 4–5: "Který Moravan by neznal nejvýš přitažlivé příběhy Libuše, této krásné a moudré zakladatelky Prahy?" [Which Moravian would not know the most captivating stories of Libuše, that beautiful and wise founder of Prague?]; "Kdo se může chlubit, že je Čech, aniž by v mládí Libuši nepřísahal věrnost svých citů, jež poté jako muž toužil přeměnit v poznání?" [Who can boast of being a Czech without, in his youth, having sworn Libuše the loyalty of his feelings, which he later, as a man, longed to transform into knowledge?].

[36] "Smetanova Libuše." *Smetanova Libuše*, smetanovalibuse.cz, n.d., accessed November 30, 2020. https://www.smetanovalibuse.cz/kopie-z-masaryk-a-libuse-smetanova-libuse2/.

[37] In 1817 and 1818 two supposed medieval documents appeared and were named after the places in which they were found *Rukopis královédvorský* and *Rukopis zelenohorský*. They caused quite an excitement in the Czech patriotic public because, if original, they confirmed the long-lasting continuity of statehood and the existing collective memory of the oldest periods of Czech history. At the same time, the other side of that public debate, led by Josef Dobrovský, claimed that the Manuscripts were forgeries. However, there existed an entire generation of 19th-century Czech historians, including František Palacký, who firmly believed the manuscripts to be genuine, thought of them as the "national Paladium" and equated one's sense of national identification with their stance on the Manuscripts. Cf. František Graus, "Knežna Libuše – od postavy báje k národnímu symbolu," *Československý časopis historický* 17 (1969): 839–841; Pavlína Rychterová,

and even citing it at some places, meant that the opera creators sided with the group that believed the Manuscripts to be original, and thus used these "medieval sources" as scientific historiographical confirmation of ideas of Czech statehood, continuity and democracy,[38] intended for the entire society/nation to see it being presented on the stage of the National theatre.

For conveying the political messages through the libretto itself two scenes were key – the court scene in the first act and the prophecy in the opera's *finale*. The main function of both of these scenes was to highlight dissatisfaction with the actions of the (Habsburg) state authorities and remind the audience of the importance of the Czech national dynasty, Czech state law, and the autonomy of the country.

The entire opera, in fact, represents the celebration of the idea of national freedom. Its plot is set in the period of national rulers, it shows the founding of the national Přemyslid dynasty, emphasizes the importance of obeyance of the Czech legal system and (completely anachronistically) depicts the idea that the Czech society was democratic as early as in the Early Middle Ages (which, in the plot, manifested in the people's insistence that Libuše remains their ruler when she offered them the choice of selecting a new prince themselves if they did not want to have a woman as their sovereign). The opera contains four important political messages, contained in the two aforementioned key scenes.

The scene of Libuše's judgement emphasizes the importance of political autonomy and the Czech legal system, while the prophecy scene highlights the importance of the national dynasty and national persistence. Namely, setting the plot in the times of independent rulers of the independent Czech principality in the Early Middle Ages could be interpreted as an expression of dissatisfaction with the current state of limited political autonomy that the Bohemian Kingdom had in the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. And in the same scene, Libuše's adherence to Czech, and not German, law when resolving the conflict between the brothers Chrudoš and Sťáhlav accentuated the necessity of respecting Czech rights and of protecting Czech interests in the Bohemian Kingdom, that is, through that scene an objection to the overpowering German influence was expressed.

The court scene is maybe the most well-known element of the Libuše legend and it had a couple of possible interpretations: its purpose was not just to depict

"The Manuscripts of Grünberg and Königinhof: Romantic Lies about the Glorious Past of the Czech Nation," in *Manufacturing a Past for the Present*, ed. János M. Bak, Patrick J. Geary and Gábor Klaniczay (Brill, 2014), 19–20.

[38] More on the use of the Manuscripts in confirming the values that were being presented as inherently Czech see Mojmír Otruba, "Poezie, mýtus a hodnota: (Konkretizace a estetické hodnocení Rukopisu královédvorského)," *Česká literatura* 16, no. 4 (1968): 357–392.

Libuše as a wise and just ruler, but also to assert the legitimacy of her rule, and that of the national dynasty (implying that her just rule had transferred into even better Přemyslav's rule, and after him, the perfect rule of the Přemyslid dynasty).[39] It, symbolically, represented political tensions of the time of its composition, the fight between the brothers represented discords in the Czech politics, and with the final reconciliation hope for future reconciliation in reality, and return of harmony was expressed.[40] This scene, also, served to depict the version of "social contract" between the ruler and the Bohemian Kingdom that was agreeable to the Czech patriotic elites: Libuše announces that she was *elected to the throne by the assembly of peasants, freemen and nobles*, which was extremely important in the context of 1871 attempted compromise. That is also the reason why the lords, as characters, are important in the opera, although they have hardly any dramatical significance in the plot, and why the reconciliation between Přemyslav and Chrudoš was significant in the plot's denouement.[41] When Libuše offered to renounce the throne, all the gathered people insisted that she remain their princess, which simultaneously meant that Libuše had every right to rule, but also indicated that the people choose their own ruler themselves. That scene also expresses the superiority of Czech customary law over German law, which could have easily been interpreted as the superiority of "Czechness" over "Germaness."

Dissatisfaction with the contemporary political situation can be found in yet another instance. And paradoxically, while in some other national operas composed in the Habsburg Monarchy in the 19th century that dissatisfaction is clearly noticeable, despite being expressed subtly enough not to be subject to censorship, dissatisfaction with the King's relations and actions towards Bohemia is very strongly expressed in *Libuše*, although it is hardly noticeable at first glance. That dissatisfaction is conveyed via the scene of Libuše's prophecy, which was not originally intended as the opera's *finale* (in fact, only two musical motifs from that scene can be found in Smetana's notebook with motif sketches), but was later added as a reaction to the ruler's actions.[42] Namely, in the Bohemian Kingdom there existed a tradition of composing coronation operas – *Constanza e fortezza* by Johann Joseph Fux for the coronation of Charles VI, *Semiramide* (on the libretto by Pietro Metastasio, the composer was not mentioned and it was probably a *pasticcio*) for the coronation of Maria Theresa, *La clemenza di Tito* by Wolfgang

[39] Marta Ottlová and Milan Pospíšil, *Bedřich Smetana a jeho doba* (NLN, 1997), 86, 92.

[40] Očadlík, *Libuše. Vznik Smetanovy zpěvohry*, 33.

[41] Fránek and Futtera, "Postava kněžny Libuše v německých a českých operních libretech 19. století," 22.

[42] Cf. Očadlík, *Libuše. Vznik Smetanovy zpěvohry*, 174, 180–181.

Amadeus Mozart for the coronation of Leopold II,[43] and for the expected coronation of Franz Josef I Bedřich Smetana composed *Libuše*. However, even though he had promised to have himself crowned as King of Bohemia three times (in 1861, 1865 and 1871), the coronation of Franz Josef never took place. The people expected him to be formally crowned, especially in 1871 when the king was even ready to reach a compromise with the Bohemian Kingdom,[44] so when it didn't happen the sense of disappointment and breach of promise was widely felt, and the reflections of those sentiments can also be detected in *Libuše*. Smetana received the libretto at a time when the country was under the threat of war from the North German Confederation and was motivated by its central ideas (of Czech autonomy and statehood), and it seems that he also shared the general optimism prompted by the articulation of the Fundamental Articles – at that time he worked on the first and the beginning of the second act.[45] However, in 1872 Franz Josef decided that he wasn't going to have himself crowned, and the resentment that was felt across the country can also be observed in the opera plot, reflected in strong, almost militant, outbursts of national sentiment. Mirko Očadlík finds an example of these feelings in the *finale* of Act II, in the scene in which the people promise to always follow Přemysl,[46] and the negation of King's right to be celebrated peaked in the opera's *finale*.[47] After the King broke his promise and showed his disrespect for the Bohemian Kingdom in doing so, Smetana made a point to highlight the imperative of nations' sovereignty and added the prophecy scene, in which the nation was celebrated as perfect – harmonious, unified and integral – collective entity,[48] as the *finale*. On top of that,

[43] Cf. John A. Rice, *The Operatic Culture at the Court of Emperor Leopold II and Its Connection to Mozart's La Clemenza di Tito*. Lecture given at the conference "La clemenza di Tito and Mozartian Aesthetics," Kungliga Myntkabinettet, Stockholm, August 24–27, 2013, organized by the Nordic Network for Early Opera, 1, 6–7.

[44] In 1871 the Fundamental Articles were articulated, and the proposed compromise would grant Bohemia wider autonomy and, in relations with Austria, place it in the same status which Hungary had received with the *Ausgleich* in 1867. However, the Fundamental Articles were never implemented (largely because of the Hungarian opposition to such compromise, but also because of the opposition of some other elements in the Monarchy, notably liberal Germans and the Silesian Diet).

[45] The first act was completed on September 2nd, 1871, the second on February 18th, 1872, and the third on November 12th, 1872; while Franz Josef refused to sanction the Fundamental Articles on October 20th, 1871, and the following year he also decided that he would not have himself formally crowned Bohemian king. Cf. OH, Smetanova "Libuše," *Dalibor* 3, no. 17 (1881): 132.

[46] *With you we all shall go together / where ever you will bid us go, / courage leads us into battle / which cannot but end in victory!* In Bedřich Smetana and Josef Wenzig, *Libuše* (Supraphon, 1966), II, 5.

[47] Cf. Očadlík *Libuše. Vznik Smetanovy zpěvohry*, 174.

[48] Ottlová and Pospíšil, *Bedřich Smetana a jeho doba*, 95.

the librettist Josef Wenzig envisioned that right after the end (which ends with the lyrics: *Czech people shall never perish, / they all hell's horrors will ever resist! / Glory! Glory![49]), the future Czech national anthem Kde domov můj?* should always be sung.[50] This intervention would interrupt opera's setting in historical time, allowing the audience to became part of the work and thus creating an imaginary bridge between the nation's "golden era" of the Middle Ages and the then-current 19th century and its national movement, skipping over the period of rule of foreign dynasties.[51] This interpretation can even be taken a step further if we take into account Smetana's earlier works, namely the *Triumphal Symphony* (1853–1854), in which the recognizable motif of the *Kaiserhymne* was used (however, it is important to note that this work didn't represent Smetana's adherence to the restrictive post-1848 politics, but, on the contrary, a new wave of hope for the change of the country's political direction and for the achievement of national desires, widely felt at the time of Francis Joseph's marriage to Elizabeth Wittelsbach).[52] By insisting on the performance of a rousing song that had the status of a national anthem (and would officially be made an anthem in 1918 as part of the Czechoslovak national anthem together with the Slovak anthem *Nad Tatrou sa blýska*, and later the Czech anthem in 1993), it meant that no longer the ruler, but now the nation had primacy.

The celebration of Czech freedom and statehood is most strongly and most directly expressed in the very contents of the prophecy scene. In six pictures, important persons and events of the era of the national dynasty are presented. The first picture, *Břetislav a Jitka*, describes the reign of Břetislav I (1034–1055), the first prince who gathered all the Czech lands under his rule. The second picture, *Jaroslav ze Šternberka*, deals with the period of the Tatar invasion. According to Václav Hájek it was Jaroslav of Šternberk who was the key figure in the defence of Bohemia at the time[53] (although modern historians largely believe that he was a fictional character), and this picture describes his brave fight and points out that he dispelled the cloud of danger that loomed over the country from the east (while Břetislav dispelled the cloud of danger that threatened the country from the west, referring to his conflict with the Holy Roman Emperor Henry III). The third picture, *Otakar II, Eliška a Karel IV*, illustrates the transfer of the crown from

[49] Smetana, Wenzig, *Libuše*, III, 5, 6.

[50] Očadlík, *Libuše. Vznik Smetanovy zpěvohry*, 175.

[51] Cf. Fránek and Futtera, "Postava kněžny Libuše v německých a českých operních libretech 19. století," 23.

[52] Očadlík, *Libuše. Vznik Smetanovy zpěvohry*, 31, 175.

[53] Václav Hájek z Libočan, *Kronika Česká*, Vol. III (Czech Academy of Sciences and Arts, 1929), 455–457.

the Přemyslid dynasty to the Luxembourg dynasty through Elizabeth (Eliška), Otakar II Přemyslid's granddaughter and Charles IV of Luxembourg's mother; thus emphasizing continuity with the national dynasty. Also, their most important achievements are highlighted: Otakar II, the most powerful ruler of the Přemyslid dynasty, is called "lord who rules from sea to sea, […] town builder and friend of the people!;" Elizabeth is said to be beloved by the whole nation because she birthed them not a ruler but a father; finally, importance of the founding of Prague University by Charles IV is emphasized in the verse that he was "a father who to the Czechs / gave the bread of culture at their own table!"[54] The fourth picture, *Žižka, Prokop Veliký a husité*, describes the period of Hussite wars, their victories, but above all else, the chaos of warfare. The fifth picture deals with Jiří z Poděbrad, a prominent figure of the mid-15th-century power struggles and the leader of the Czech Utraquists. He conquered Prague in 1448, became governor of Bohemia in 1452, and regent of Ladislaus V in 1453. Poděbrad was the last ruler of Czech origin (followed by Matthias Corvinus, the Jagiellonian dynasty and the Habsburgs from 1526 onwards) and his reign is considered to be the last glorious period of Czech history.[55] This penultimate picture ends with the announcement that the Czech people will experience very difficult times in their future, but that they will endure it all and will never perish. With that prophecy, the last picture shows the royal city of Prague in a magical illumination, and the choir accepts the prophecy's text *Czech people shall never perish, / they all hell's horrors will ever resist! / Glory! Glory!*[56]

Although the audience was not aware of the reason for the inclusion of the prophecy scene, it fully succeeded in fulfilling its rousing function by reminding the audience of the most important and glorious events of Czech history. Starting with the autonomous rulers of the first Czech principality, through the national royal Přemyslid dynasty and the Hussite wars, the prophecy scene, as well as the whole opera, ends with an indubitable announcement that the Czech nation will survive all hardships it may encounter. *Libuše*, as well as some other of Smetana's works (notably, *Má vlast*), served its intended purpose well, and not only in the time it was first performed, but also in other periods. Namely, Tomáš Masaryk partly built his political platform on historical narratives, especially on the interpretations of them that subordinated the past to the present[57]

[54] Smetana, Wenzig, *Libuše*, III, 5, 3.

[55] Cf. "Juraj Podjebradski," in *Hrvatska opća enciklopedija* (Leksikografski zavod Miroslav Krleža, 2003), 401–402.

[56] Smetana, Wenzig, *Libuše*, III, 5, 6.

[57] Kelly St. Pierre, *Bedřich Smetana. Myth, Music, and Propaganda* (University of Rochester Press, 2017), 95–96.

(simply put, that saw the political gains of his own time as being the fulfilment of centuries-long national desires) and Libuše, regardless of the fact that she was not a real historical person but part of national myths, fitted those interpretations very well. In this context, *Libuše* was also an important bearer of national symbolism during the First World War because its "timeless Czechness even threatened Habsburg authorities while remaining ineffable enough to evade their censorship."[58] How important it was, and remained, in the Czech cultural consciousness is best demonstrated by the fact that the *fanfare* from *Libuše* were used as presidential musical accompaniment from the time of Tomáš Masaryk, and performances of *Libuše* were seen as symbol of opposition to the Nazi oppression,[59] while today it is performed on symbolically important dates – New

[58] Ibid, 96.

[59] Notable in this context are the second-to-last performance of *Libuše* in 1939, and the first one in 1945. The first performance that took place after the German occupation on May 15th, 1939 and the establishment of the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia (May 16th, 1939) took place on May 29th with Marie Podvalová in the title role and conducted by Václav Talich. Talich thought that after the occupation, cultural matters became the most important component of the expression of national will and pride, so he organized "The Prague Musical May," which consisted of nine performances of works of Czech national importance, and those of world importance – *Libuše* included – that were supposed to convey the message of goodness and peace (A. Dvořák: *Rusalka*, B. Smetana: *My Homeland*, B. Smetana: *The Bartered Bride*, A. Dvořák, *Slavonic Dances*, B. Smetana: *The Secret*, J. Suk: *Epilogue*, *To the New Life*, and *Meditations on the Old Czech Choral Saint Wenceslas*, W. A. Mozart: *The Magic Flute*, L. van Beethoven: *Symphony No. 9*, and B. Smetana: *Libuše*). Seeing the opera, and especially the Prophecy scene, as a strong exhibition of national pride the audience awarded it with long frenetic applause and standing ovations, followed by dignified singing of the national anthem in one voice and another round of applause afterwards (which can all be heard on a rare and valuable live recording of this performance, published in 2020). Antonín Šilhan, critic of the *Národní listý* newspapers, remarked that B. Smetana probably didn't expect *Libuše* to not only be an expression of national joy, but that its task would also be to call to the nation "Sursum corda!", and that that mission would be so frequent. Taken aback by the national fervour the opera provoked, the occupational authorities had *Libuše* revoked from the stage after the June 2nd performance (the recording of which does not exist, but there is no reason not to assume that the audience reacted any differently than on the performance of May 29th). Likewise, the performance of *Libuše* on May 27th, 1945, the first performance in the National Theatre after the Nazi occupation, provoked equal enthusiasm with the audience, but that time in much more positive circumstances. Cf. Antonín Šilhan, "Český mythus v opeře," *Národní listý*, 79, no. 148 (May 31st, 1939); ***, Svátek českého lidu v Národním divadle, *Právo lidu*, 48, no. 14 (May 29th, 1945), 1; Kateřina Nová, "Sondy do vztahu Václava Talicha a Otakara Šourka na pozadí jejich vzájemné korespondence v letech 1939–1956 (dokončení)," *Hudební věda*, 50, no. 1–2 (2013): 148; Martin Bojda, "Mimořádný záznam Talichovy Libuše z května 1939 versus současný úpadek," *Libuše Journal*, n.d., https://www.libuse-journal.com/art-reviews-1/2020/mimo%C5%99%C3%A1dn%C3%BD-z%C3%A1znam-talichovy-libu%C5%A1e-z-kv%C4%9Btna-1939-versus-sou%C4%8Dasn%C3%BD-%C3%BApadek/; Václav Talich, Prague National Theatre Orchestra, and Czech Philharmonic, *Smetana: Libuše (Live 1939)*. Supraphon, 2020.

Year's Day, October 28th, in remembrance of the break of all connections with Austria-Hungary in 1918, and on May 8th, on Victory Day over Nazism.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be stated that Smetana's national operas were successful in their intentions. They were well-received by the audience and served their intended purpose to strengthen their sense of national identity and cohesion. The dissatisfaction with the Habsburg attitudes towards Bohemia – which were also expressed – surely played a part in the operas' success. They were important binding factors not only in the 19th century, but also during the difficult times in the 20th century.

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